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Joe Trudeau
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Dear Mr. Trudeau:

On behalf of the Coconino National Forest, I would like to thank you for your involvement in the Cragin Watershed Protection Project (CWPP). This letter is in response to the objection you filed on the Final Environmental Assessment (EA) and Draft Decision Notice (DN). I have read your objection, reviewed the project record and Final EA, and considered our discussion during the objection resolution meeting, held on July 10, 2018, and in follow-up emails in the days since. My review of your objection was conducted in accordance with the administrative review procedures found at 36 CFR 218, Subparts A and C.

PROJECT OVERVIEW

The CWPP area lies within the 2.4 million-acre Four Forest Restoration Initiative (4FRI) and is within the Rim Country Environmental Impact Statement analysis area. The project area also overlaps ongoing projects that include forest vegetation treatments. This project has been a collaborative effort that has involved substantial investments of time and resources from cooperating agencies including the Salt River Project and the Bureau of Reclamation, the US Fish and Wildlife Service, the Arizona Game and Fish Department, and the City of Payson. The three watersheds that feed the C.C. Cragin Reservoir were identified as priority watersheds in the Western Watershed Enhancement Project, and in 2014 a Memorandum of Understanding was signed by the Coconino National Forest, the Salt River Project, Bureau of Reclamation, National Forest Foundation and the Town of Payson to proactively improve the health of the three watersheds. This project is a key manifestation of these previous agreements and multi-stakeholder landscape prioritization efforts. Many other individuals and organizations have also participated extensively and provided feedback during the planning process to improve the efficacy of planned treatments and more clearly assess environmental effects.

The potential threat of wildfire to the use of C.C. Cragin Reservoir as a domestic and municipal water supply is exemplified by the 2002 Hayman Fire in Colorado. This wildfire burned over 137,000 acres, impacting watersheds that provide domestic and municipal water to several cities along Colorado's Rocky Mountain Front Range including the City of Denver. Over a two-year period following the fire, water providers spent \$25 million removing sediment from a reservoir that serves as a source of potable water with additional costs due to slope re-stabilization efforts. In addition to increased erosion and its impact on suspended sediment concentrations in surface waters, high-severity wildfires can result in an increase in nutrient loading (i.e., nitrogen and



phosphorus) to water bodies resulting in an increase in algal growth and reduction in dissolved oxygen leading to fish kill.

The purpose and need for the project is focused on reducing the potential for high severity wildfire and subsequent flooding. The actions proposed in this project's EA were thoughtfully developed to meet the purpose and need and desired conditions for the ecological setting, based upon current conditions specific to the CWPP.

ADMINISTRATIVE REVIEW PROCESS

The legal notice for the objection filing period was published on May 20, 2018. Your timely objection (18-03-00-0015-O218) was received on June 18, 2018. The regulations at 36 CFR 218 provide for a pre-decisional administrative review process in which the objector provides sufficient narrative description of the project, specific issues related to the project, and suggested remedies that would resolve the objections (36 CFR 218.8). This letter is my written response to your objections.

OBJECTION RESPONSES

ISSUE 1: The Final EA is inconsistent with the 2012 MSO Recovery Plan, the Coconino National Forest Plan, and/or the 4FRI Large and Old Tree Implementation Plan.

Contention 1a: The CWPP Final EA, Appendix B, states that "*In MSO Recovery Habitat...Trees larger than 18 inches may be removed to manage for large oaks in conformance with the old and large tree implementation plan.*" This statement appeared in the CWPP Final EA, but does not appear in the CWPP Draft EA. This management direction stands in contrast to the 2012 MSO Recovery Plan (p. 268), nowhere in the 2012 MSO Recovery Plan does it state that removal of trees larger than 18" is needed for MSO recovery. Coconino National Forest Plan guideline FW-WFP-G-1 states that "*habitat management objectives and species protection measures from approved recovery plans should be applied to activities occurring within federally listed species habitat to promote recovery of the species.*" As the 2012 MSO Recovery Plan recommends against removal of trees greater than 18" in Recovery Habitat, CBD argues that removing trees greater than 18" d.b.h. is additionally in violation of Plan guideline FW-WFP-G-1. Guidance from the 4FRI Large and Old Tree Implementation Plan makes clear that removing trees over 18" d.b.h. is not permitted under the exceptions for application within Ponderosa Pine/Gambel Oak Forest. [Objection, pp. 2-3]

Response: The Mexican Spotted Owl (MSO) Recovery Plan (USDI, 2012) [PR 284, p. 1085] does not prohibit removal of trees greater than 18" dbh in recovery habitat. The plan does prohibit removal of trees greater than 24" dbh throughout MSO recovery habitat.

The recovery plan states that trees 18"+ dbh may be removed to meet other forest restoration objectives within general MSO recovery habitat areas. One of these restoration objectives stated in the recovery plan is to "*emphasize large hardwoods (trees) where appropriate*" (USDI, 2012, Table C1, p. 275).

The recovery plan requires that 25 percent of mixed conifer forest recovery habitat acres, and 10 percent of pine-oak forest recovery habitat acres be managed as MSO replacement nest-roost habitat areas. A minimum of 120 square feet of basal area for mixed conifer habitat and 110 square feet of basal area for pine-oak habitat must be maintained within these areas. A minimum of 30 percent of the required basal area must be maintained in trees 18" dbh or greater. However, there is no prohibition to removal of trees 18"+ dbh, providing that the minimum density is maintained. The Mogollon Rim Ranger District has identified MSO nest/roost replacement habitat areas at the ranger district level (25 percent of all mixed conifer acres, 15 percent of all pine-oak areas) [PR 284, p. 12, Table 3]. *Some of these habitat acres are located within the CWPP, but none of these areas are proposed for tree cutting treatments; some are proposed for low severity prescribed burning to focus on thinning of small trees and reduction of downed woody fuels.*

There are some tree cutting treatments proposed for selected MSO Protected Activity Center habitat areas (PACs) within the CWPP [PR 284, Table 13, p. 29-31; PR 262, Appendix A]. All of these treatments involve cutting trees less than 18" dbh, and maintaining 60% canopy cover on average within the PAC locations.

The US Department of Interior, Fish and Wildlife Service (USDI-FWS) was consulted regarding the proposed treatments, and the Biological Assessment [PR 254, 255] documents CWPP consistency with the MSO Recovery Plan. Specific PAC treatments are proposed to be consistent with protecting or enhancing MSO habitat as described by the USDI-FWS Biological Opinion Document (in progress). Therefore this project is in compliance with the 2012 MSO Recovery Plan as described above, it is also in compliance with Forest Plan Guideline FW-WFP-G-1. As such, there is no Forest Plan violation.

The proposed "Large and Old Tree Implementation Plan" [PR 292, p. 411] was developed specifically for the CWPP, to address local current conditions, objectives and differing environmental settings than the 4FRI Project area (see response to Contention 1b).

Contention 1b: CBD asserts that the 4FRI Large Tree Implementation Plan is intended to conserve large trees as defined as those 16" d.b.h. and up, with exceptions as defined solely in the Large and Old Tree Implementation Plan. The reference to VSS 5 and 6 tree size classes in the 1st 4FRI EIS, Appendix D, was not a clear statement that a "large" tree is one that is over 18", it simply stated the sizes of VSS 5 and 6 trees and that they correspond well with existing classification systems. That statement alone did not suggest that the VSS system is more useful for large tree retention. To the contrary, the 1st 4FRI Final EIS repeatedly identifies large trees as those greater than 16" d.b.h.

CBD also contends, contrary to the Forest's November 11, 2017, response to comments, that reference to 5 separate repeated common directions that would permit removal of ponderosa pine up to 18" d.b.h. was included in the 1st 4FRI EIS Large and Old Tree Implementation Plan. This specific quote can be found six times in Section A of the FEIS, Appendix D. It is not recorded in Section C (Old Tree Implementation Plan) or in Section D (Modified Large Tree Implementation Plan). The six instances where this guidance is used would allow the Forest to cut up to

18" d.b.h., restricted to occasions where removal of a large young tree can reduce crown competition with an isolated or individual old tree. Each allowance includes identical criteria that specify the application of the guidance.

Similar allowance is provided in situations where preservation of large, old oak trees is a primary objective. In this case, ten instances identify where and when a large young ponderosa pine, up to 18" d.b.h., can be removed to reduce competition with oaks greater than 10" DRC (Appendix D). The 1st 4FRI EIS provides these exceptions in addition to the exceptions listed in the Appendix D, Section D of the FEIS. Also, trees up to 17.9" could be cut in certain MSO PACs, but not removed. Otherwise, the 1st 4FRI EIS NEPA record clearly identifies a large tree as one greater than 16" d.b.h. In contrast, the Glossary provided in the CWPP Final EA (p. 402) defines a "large tree" as: "*A large tree as defined in the revised Mexican Spotted Owl Recovery Plan (2012) is a tree greater than 18-inch d.b.h.*"

Neither the Strategy nor the 4FRI Large Tree Implementation Plan are integrated into CWPP without distortion. [Objection, pp. 6-14]

Response: Project specific implementation guides and technical specifications developed for a different project under a separate environmental analysis do not constrain or direct actions on another project. Each project must be consistent with the Coconino Forest Plan [PR 296], and other relevant laws, regulations, and policies. Each project must analyze and disclose the effects of the proposed action. This project is not a connected action to the 4FRI phase 1 project [PR 40, 41, 42], and has a more focused and somewhat different purpose and need. As such, it stands alone as a project that has been defined, analyzed, and disclosed.

Definitions of "large trees" are project situational, ambiguous, and irrelevant to the analysis of the effects of this proposed action. The project-specific analysis [PR 262] addresses the current and projected post-treatment forest structure by tree size class in the context of the CWPP purpose and need, and Forest Plan Desired Conditions. The Coconino National Forest Plan does not place restrictions on the cutting of trees by size class, nor does it define what is considered to be a "large tree." The MSO Recovery Plan prohibits cutting trees greater than 24" dbh in recovery habitat, except to provide for public safety and other high priority circumstances. No trees greater than 24" dbh are proposed for removal in MSO recovery habitat, unless the exception criteria applies. The recovery plan does require that minimum densities of trees 18" dbh or greater be maintained within the replacement nest/roost, and protected activity center habitat areas. This project was developed to meet the stated purpose and need, and is consistent with the Forest Plan Desired Conditions for the ponderosa pine [PR 296, p. 73] and dry mixed conifer [PR 296, p. 79] forest types, and the MSO recovery plan. These desired conditions describe development and maintenance of uneven-aged forest conditions, focusing on moving towards a balance of young, mid-aged, and old trees (by percent area or growing space allocation) within each stand over time. Desired conditions also describe desired species compositions, and prioritize maintenance and development of hardwood species where appropriate (based on ecological site conditions). As such, each stand is proposed to be evaluated to focus management on tree removal of various sized trees to move towards the desired distribution of tree sizes/ages, species composition, and overall density. A single treatment definition is not proposed or desirable for the project area, since each stand is currently

composed of differing species, tree sizes/ages, insect and disease conditions, and density; however, technical specifications have been included to favor the larger and more vigorous hardwood species where they occur throughout the project area by removing competing conifer trees within a specified distance from the hardwood tree. The proposed “Large and Old Tree Implementation Plan” [PR 292, p. 411] was specifically developed to manage for the purpose and need, and desired conditions for the Cragin Watershed Protection Project (CWPP) [PR 292], based upon the local ecological setting and current conditions.

ISSUE 2: The Final EA is not compliant with the Healthy Forest Restoration Act (HFRA) mandate to retain large trees contributing to old-growth structure.

Contention 2a: Based on the definition of the “Fire Risk Reduction Operational Safety Needs or WUI Protection” category, as it is called in the Final EA (p. 412), the Large Tree Implementation Plan would permit large tree removal anywhere across more than 80 percent of the CWPP project area. Figure 37 in the Final EA (p. 125) identifies nearly the entire project area as WUI. Without clarification or reformulation, this renders the Large Tree Implementation Plan meaningless as there would be no limitation on the removal of large trees across most of the project area. This component of the Large Tree Implementation Plan was not included in the CWPP Draft EA. This category would further increase interspaces beyond the upper limit of vegetation community desired conditions and further decrease canopy cover as a desired condition for all forested vegetative communities across 80 percent of the project area. Constraint on the use of intensive WUI treatments across virtually the entire CWPP landscape must be clarified. The elimination of large tree protections in addition to the application of the increased interspace across 80% of the project is not consistent with the full range of objectives of the project, including protection of threatened and endangered species habitats. Furthermore, an unconstrained reduction in the limitations placed on large tree removal is not compliant with the HFRA, Section 102(e)(2). [Objection, pp. 3-5]

Response: The proposed treatments for the Cragin Watershed Protection Project (CWPP) [PR 292, 262] are consistent with the Coconino National Forest Plan Desired Conditions for the ponderosa pine and dry mixed conifer forest types [PR 296, pp. 73, 79]. These desired conditions were developed to restore healthy and functioning forest ecosystems and forest structures appropriate for the respective forest types. The Forest Plan provides exhaustive justification for the Desired Conditions including the appropriate ranges of forest densities. The Desired Conditions describe forest conditions to be developed and/or maintained, not trees to be retained or removed. As such, each stand treatment must be implemented to move towards the desired species and tree size/age composition consistent with the Forest Plan and Threatened and Endangered Species recovery plans. The proposed CWPP “Large and Old Tree Implementation Plan” [PR 292, p. 411] would guide the development of all site specific forest treatments within the project area, regardless of WUI location or status.

The Healthy Forest Restoration Act (HFRA), Section 102(f)(1)(B) [PR 18] states that management “*maximizes the retention of large trees, as appropriate for the forest type, to the extent that the trees promote fire-resilient stands.*” The Forest Plan Desired Conditions serve as project guidelines for the number of large trees appropriate for the forest type. These desired conditions were developed based upon the best available and peer-reviewed science relevant to

the ecology of these forest types in the Southwestern United States. Therefore, projects that are consistent with the Forest Plan Desired Conditions are focused on maintaining and developing overall forest structure with appropriate numbers of large trees for each distinct forest type.

HFRA authorizes hazardous fuels reduction projects under HFRA analysis criteria for lands on *“condition class 3 Federal land, in such proximity to a municipal water supply system or stream feeding such a system within a municipal watershed that a significant risk exists that a fire disturbance event would have adverse effects on the water quality of the municipal water supply or the maintenance of the system, including a risk to water quality posed by erosion following such a fire disturbance event.”* (HFRA Section 102 (a)(2)). This definition clearly defines the entire CWPP area as meeting the criteria for HFRA environmental analysis.

CONCLUSION

My review finds that the project is in compliance with all applicable laws and the Coconino National Forest Plan. However, I am issuing instructions to the Forest Supervisor to clarify a few points. These instructions include:

- The Final Decision Notice and an errata will be published to remove the last sentence from Project Design Feature W7 and include a reference to the large tree implementation plan:

As it is currently written on p. 422 of the CWPP Final EA: W7 - In MSO recovery habitat, manage for large oaks by removing conifers up to 18 inches dbh that do not meet the “old tree” definition within 30 feet of oak 10 inches diameter at root collar or larger. Trees larger than 18 inches may be removed to manage for large oaks in conformance with the old and large tree implementation plan.

As it will occur in the Final Decision Notice and Errata: In MSO recovery habitat, manage for large oaks by removing conifers up to 18 inches dbh that do not meet the “old tree” definition within 30 feet of oak 10 inches diameter at root collar or larger. Refer to Table X in the large tree implementation plan in the Final Decision Notice.

- The large tree implementation plan from the EA will be replaced by a final large tree implementation plan in the Decision Notice. Changes in the final plan will include the addition of Table X under the Desired Conditions section for the Ponderosa Pine/Gambel Oak Forest (Pine-Oak PIPO/QUGA) category (Final EA, pp. 411-414).

Table X. Management direction for when it may be necessary to remove large trees to move toward desired conditions for maintaining and enhancing large oaks.

Treatment type	Direction for moving toward desired conditions
Ponderosa pine Treatments outside PFAs	Trees over 18 inch d.b.h. may be removed within 30 feet of oak 10 inches diameter at root collar or larger so that older oak trees are enhanced and maintained. Removal of large trees to enhance oaks will be applied selectively to meet basal area and forest structure desired conditions.
Ponderosa Pine Treatments within Northern Goshawk PFAs	Trees over 18 inch d.b.h. may be removed within 30 feet of oak 10 inches diameter at root collar or larger so that older oak trees are enhanced and maintained. Removal of large trees to enhance oaks will be applied selectively to meet basal area and forest structure desired conditions.
Precommercial Thinning	No trees over 18 inch d.b.h. will be removed for the purpose of enhancing or maintaining oaks.
MSO Recovery Habitat–Ponderosa Pine-Gambel Oak	Within 30 feet of oak 10-inch diameter at the root collar or larger, post-settlement mixed conifer trees up to 18 inches d.b.h. (that do not have interlocking crowns with oak) may be removed to ensure they are not restricting oak development.
MSO Recovery Habitat–Mixed Conifer	Within 30 feet of oak 10-inch diameter at the root collar or larger, post-settlement mixed conifer trees up to 18 inches d.b.h. (that do not have interlocking crowns with oak) may be removed to ensure they are not restricting oak development.
MSO PAC Treatments–Ponderosa Pine-Gambel Oak	Within 30 feet of oak 10-inch diameter at the root collar or larger, post-settlement mixed conifer trees up to 18 inches d.b.h. (that do not have interlocking crowns with oak) may be removed to ensure they are not restricting oak development.
MSO PAC Treatments–Mixed Conifer	Within 30 feet of oak 10-inch diameter at the root collar or larger, post-settlement mixed conifer trees up to 18 inches d.b.h. (that do not have interlocking crowns with oak) may be removed to ensure they are not restricting oak development.
MSO PAC Treatments – Precommercial Thinning	No trees over 18 inch d.b.h. will be removed for the purpose of enhancing or maintaining oaks.
Baker Butte Treatment	No trees over 18 inch d.b.h. will be removed for the purpose of enhancing or maintaining oaks.

- The large tree implementation plan from the EA will be replaced by a final large tree implementation plan in the Decision. The following changes (proposed changes are shown underlined and in *italics*) will also be made to the language included in the “Fire Risk Reduction Operational Safety Needs or WUI Protection” category of the large tree implementation plan as it currently is in the Final EA (p. 412).

Fire Risk Reduction Operational Safety Needs or WUI Protection


The CWPP area includes a number of values at risk including facilities, infrastructure, residences, and the CC Cragin Reservoir. It may be necessary to remove one or more large trees in various situations to meet the desired conditions identified to reduce specific risks or the project purpose of reducing the risk of high-intensity fire in WUI areas. This category for removal of large trees will apply to the approximately 17,000 acres that have been identified as important for treatment to protect the Cragin Project dam infrastructure and facilities, powerlines, DOPLAR radar site, campgrounds, lookout towers, and other facilities as depicted in Figure 37 of the Cragin Watershed Protection Project Final EA (p.125).

Desired Conditions

- Minimize fire hazards where protection of people, structures, and community infrastructure (such as roads, bridges, power corridors, and water supply) in and associated with the wildland-urban interface (WUI) are at risk
- Forest conditions in the WUI, such as live and dead fuel loading, tree basal area, logs, and snags, are on the lower end of the range given in cover type desired conditions
- In forested vegetation communities, the area occupied by interspace with grass/forb/shrub vegetation is on the upper end of, or above, the range given in the vegetation community desired conditions. Trees within groups may be more widely spaced with less interlocking of the crowns than desirable in adjacent forest lands. Interspaces between tree groups are of sufficient size to discourage isolated group torching from spreading as a crown fire to other groups.

I agree to make these changes even though there was not complete resolution on your objection. I appreciated the discussion and opportunity to further understand your concerns and explore where we had common interests and goals. The Forest Supervisor, Laura Jo West, may sign the Decision Notice for this project once these instructions have been addressed. My review constitutes the final administrative determination of the Department of Agriculture; no further review from any other Forest Service or Department of Agriculture official of my written response to your objection is available [36 CFR 218.11(b)(2)].

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Calvin N. Joyner". To the left of the signature, the word "for" is written in a smaller, cursive script.

CALVIN N. JOYNER
Regional Forester

cc: Laura Jo West; Linda Wadleigh; Mike Dechter; Cliff Dils; Don Vandendriesche; Blair Halbrooks